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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was twofold: to validate a list of distance teaching behaviors; and to develop training guidelines on the most frequently observed and the most important behaviors of distance instructors. Respondents (distance coordinators at 30 college and university distance education sites in Georgia) were asked to indicate how frequently they had observed the distance teaching behaviors indicated on the survey instrument and how important they felt the behaviors were in delivering effective distance classes. Sixty-eight surveys were used in the data analysis. One of the 41 behaviors listed on the survey was considered to be critical to effective distance instruction: this behavior dealt with arranging for materials such as handouts to be delivered to off-campus sites as needed. The majority of the behaviors were considered to be very important. Findings are summarized in a table ranking distance instructor behaviors by importance. (AEF)

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What Are The Most Important Teaching Behaviors for Distance Instructors? Perceptions of Facilitators, Instructors and Coordinators

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Distance education is a rapidly developing instructional approach used by educators through the world. For this teaching technique to be highly effective, it is imperative that those using the system for instruction be trained appropriately (Barker & Dickson, 1996; Moore & Kearsley, 1966; Willis, 1994). Over the past decade distance educators have increased the development of guidelines for what constitutes effective distance instruction (Mc Kenzie & Davidson, 1997; Ciardulli, 1996; Dilllon, & Walsh, 1996; Thatch, 1995; Wolcott, 1995). A review of the literature, however, found nothing dealing with the identification and validation of the most important teaching behaviors displayed by distance instructors. The purpose of this study was to twofold: (1) to validate a list of distance teaching behaviors collected by the research team and (2) to develop training guidelines on the most frequently observed and the most important behaviors of distance instructors.

Methodology

A validation instrument was designed by the research team. Forty-one teaching behaviors, extracted from an extensive review of the distance education literature, discussions with distance trainers, teachers, and researchers, and the research teams' observations of distance classes. The instrument used a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to indicate on that scale how frequently they had observed the distance behaviors and how important they felt the behaviors were in delivering effective distance classes. On the importance dimension a 5 on the scale indicated that the behavior was "critical, required or necessary", 4 = "very important," 3 = "important," 2 = "somewhat important," and 1 = "unimportant." On the frequency dimension a 5 indicated that the behavior occurred "very frequently," 4 = "often," 3 = "sometimes," 2 = "seldom," and 1 = "never." This paper will report only on the importance findings.

The survey was distributed to thirty college and university distance education sites in Georgia in the spring of 1996. Distance coordinators at each of the sites were asked to complete and return a survey as well as to distribute three surveys to distance instructors and facilitators at their institution. Two hundred and ten surveys were mailed.

Analysis

Seventy three surveys were returned to the research team. Of these only sixty eight were used in the data analysis due to missing demographic information. The data were analyzed using SPSS to compute the mean scores and standard deviations. The mean scores on the importance dimension were then ranked from the highest to lowest.

Demographic Findings

The majority of the respondents were distance learning coordinators, female, and from comprehensive universities. Most of the respondents had observed/ taught one distance class. This was followed closely by respondents who had observed two to five distance classes. Table 1 below summarizes the study's demographic findings.

Important Behaviors Findings

One of the forty-one behaviors was considered to be "critical" to effective distance instruction. This behavior dealt with arranging for materials such as handouts to be delivered to off campus sites as needed. The majority of the behaviors (N = thirty-five) were considered "very important" while five of the behaviors were considered "important."

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Table 2 summarizes the importance findings. It is interesting to note that all of the distance behaviors scored above a 3.0 on the 5-point Likert scale and that the majority of the behaviors dealt with classroom management behaviors (N=17) followed by instructional (N = 14), technical (N = 5), assessment (N = 4), and dress (N=1) behaviors .

Table 1.
Demographic Data

1. Position:
   Distance Learning Coordinator (N=48 / 65.8%)
   Facilitator in distance class (N= 16 / 21.9%)
   Distance Teacher (N=4 / 5.5%)
   5 missing cases (5.48%)

2. Gender:
   Female (N=40 / 54.8%)
   Male (N=32 / 43.8%)
   1 missing case (1.4%)

3. Institution:
   Comprehensive University (N=35 / 47.9%)
   Regional University (N=18 / 24.7%)
   2 Year College (N=10 / 13.7%)
   State University/Senior College (N=8 / 11%)
   2 missing cases (2.7%)

4. Experience in observing/ teaching distance classes: (A distance class is considered to be one session that was observed or taught via GSAMS)
   Observed / taught one distance class (N=28 / 38.4%)
   Observed / taught 2-5 classes (N=26 / 35.6%)
   Observed/taught 6 or more distance classes (N=16 / 21.9%)
   3 missing cases (4.1%)

Table 2.
Distance Instructor Behaviors Ranked by Importance

Behavior	Mean	S.D.
The distance instructor.....		
1. arranges for materials such as handouts to be delivered to off campus sites as needed (management)	4.53	.91
2. communicates expertise and knowledge of the class content (instructional)	4.49	.86
3. encourages active class participation (instructional)	4.48	.85
4. has emergency phone numbers for problem solving at sites (management)	4.47	1.07
5. begins class on time (management)	4.40	.95
6. uses proper grammar and avoids the use of vulgar and slang expressions (management)	4.39	.94
7. checks the placement and clarity of the visuals on the overhead projector (technical)	4.37	1.16
8. clarifies assessment methods and expectations to students (assessment)	4.34	.93
9. makes sure students know how to signal and interrupt the instructor when problems develop (management)	4.33	.99
10. looks at students in class at the delivery site and directly into the camera to students at remote sites when making presentations (instructional)	4.33	.91
11. develops a backup plan for emergencies (management)	4.32	1.06
12. repeats students' questions for clarity before responding (instructional)	4.32	.89
13. develops rapport with students (management)	4.30	.95
14. is sensitive to students' comments (instructional)	4.29	1.09
15. sets realistic expectations on what can be covered in each distance session (management)	4.29	.91
16. encourages open dialogue between students (allows alternating responses on and off site) (management)	4.29	1.03
17. designs effective visual aids for distance education classes (instructional)	4.29	.91
18. uses a variety of teaching modalities such as lectures, discussions, role playing and hands on learning opportunities whenever possible (instructional)	4.28	1.02
19. gives immediate and effective feedback which includes both specific and general praise (instructional)	4.22	.97
20. incorporates time for a variety of activities such as small group discussions, videotapes, the Elmo, etc. (instructional)	4.22	1.02
21. when called for, uses distance education equipment with care and expertise (technical)	4.15	1.17
22. prepares to facilitate discussion between and/or among sites (management)	4.14	1.10
23. uses e-mail, the phone, and/or fax when possible(technical)	4.14	1.00
24. is aware of students' names at all sites (management)	4.13	1.15
25. varies voice inflection when delivering instruction (instructional)	4.13	.98
26. keeps students informed of their expectations including what they are to be doing in class		

	(i.e., listening, taking notes) (management)	4.10	1.19
27.	uses longer "wait time" for responses to questions and comments (management)	3.97	1.11
28.	checks students perceptions about their distance expenences (assessment)	3.93	1.07
29.	utilizes problem solving exercises such as discussions or written assignments to assess students' progress (assessment)	3.90	1.13
30.	uses informal assessment techniques such as class participation and observation to assess the degree of success of the course (assessment)	3.83	1.28
31.	is aware of student movement at all campus sites (management)	3.81	1.14
32.	establishes cues that are communicated to the students to let them know when the class is beginning and ending (management)	3.81	1.15
33.	provides class outlines for sessions (instructional)	3.77	1.32
34.	provides content reviews at the beginning of class, during the session, and at the wrap up (instructional)	3.74	1.09
35.	uses humor in class without sarcasm (instructional)	3.67	1.21
36.	wears clothing that is complimentary to the learning environment (dress)	3.54	1.23
37.	utilizes group processing skills (instructional)	3.45	1.38
38.	instructs students on the proper use of the equipment (technical)	3.44	1.41
39.	uses site facilitator to assist with the delivery of class (management)	3.25	1.46
40.	uses e-mail to send assignments and progress reports to students at all sites (technical)	3.34	1.36
41.	assesses students' prior experiences with distance education (management)	3.14	3.03

Conclusion

The results of this study, while no means conclusive, are a beginning in what will be a difficult and continuous process of identification and validation of what constitutes the uniqueness of effective instruction in the distance classroom. It is the researchers' hope that this work will be useful for training, evaluating/assessing, and/or improving distance educators and what they do in the classroom.

Where to Next?

More research on a variety of issues regarding instruction in distance education is needed. Prominent among those issues are these:

1. What do students in distance education courses identify as the most effective teaching behaviors of instructors?
2. How do effective behaviors identified by different groups (students, facilitators, trainers, etc.) compare?
3. Are there (a set of) generic teaching behaviors all instructors in distance education must master in order to be effective?
4. Does teaching style alter what constitutes effective teaching behaviors?
5. Does the content of the course to be taught influence what is considered to be effective teaching behavior?

As the world grows smaller the need for more educational opportunities for more people in more places will become epidemic. Effective distance education programs led by effective distance instructional specialists will have to be one of the cures.

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